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The need for greater diversity in the United States teaching workforce continues to increase as the numbers of teachers of color graduating from colleges of education remain low. This paper considers the current need for more minority teachers, as well as the theoretical framework and primary design of a learning community project between a developmental reading program, a writing program, a freshman experience program, and a teacher education program to increase the number of students of color recruited and retained into teacher education. Contains 24 references. (Author/RS)

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Promoting Diversity: A Learning Community Project For College Reading Programs and Teacher Education Programs

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Running Head: Promoting Diversity

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Abstract

The need for greater diversity in our nation's teaching workforce continues to increase as the numbers of teachers of color graduating from colleges of education remain low. This paper describes the current need for more minority teachers, as well as the theoretical framework and primary design of a learning community project between a developmental reading, a writing program, a freshman experience program, and a teacher education program to increase the number of students of color recruited and retained into teacher education.

Promoting Diversity: A Learning Community Project For College Reading Programs and Teacher Education Programs

Among the critical issues faced by American educators is the recruitment and training of a more diverse teaching force prepared to meet the demands and challenges of the 21st century. Social, economic, and cultural diversity is woven within the fabric of our national community to a degree unparalleled in the nation's history. Of particular importance for educators interested in the very future of the nation is meeting the needs of the expanding number of children of color in our preschools, elementary schools, middle schools, and secondary schools. Consequently, it is quite apparent that there exists an urgent need for greater diversity in the teaching force of our nation's schools.

Reviews of student and teacher demographics (Delpit, 1995; King, 1993; Yopp, 1991) show that the proportion of minority teachers in the nation's teaching force is diminishing. Presently, 10% of our teachers are either African Americans, Asian Americans, Latinos, or Indigenous Peoples, and yet, it is estimated that only 05% of the nation's teachers will be people of color in the year 2000.

Such a downward demographic shift is due in part to the decline in the number of ethnically and linguistically diverse people enrolling in and then graduating from teacher preparation programs. Equally troublesome is the parallel decline in the number choosing to enter and stay in the teaching profession. Delpit (1995) has offered several powerful reasons why people of color leave teacher education programs or the teaching profession including: the lack of culturally relevant pedagogical practices in teacher training programs; the marginalization or invalidation of minority students' experiences and voices in teacher education programs; and racial discrimination in teacher education programs and beyond. In addition to these explanations, other factors which mitigate against greater diversity in the teaching force include "the increased prevalence of competency examinations, the lack of prestige for teaching as a profession, low salaries, and less than optimal working conditions" (Delpit, 1995, p. 106). Yopp's review (1991) argues that the factors that most critically influence the shortage of minority teachers include fewer minorities going to college, lower college retention rates of minorities, as well as increased opportunities for minorities in previously closed fields.

Conversely, while the representation of minority teachers dwindles, the enrollment of children of color has grown to over 30% of the total population of elementary, middle, and secondary schools (Gay, 1993). Hence, there has been a trend in the

teaching field since the 1960's where fewer and fewer children of color are being taught by teachers of color (King, 1993). Even more dramatic are the national statistics estimating that by the year 2020, children of color will comprise nearly half of all children in public elementary, middle, and secondary schools (King, 1993). Will any of these children be taught by teachers of color?

Certainly all children, regardless of their ethnic or cultural backgrounds, need connections with minority teachers to enrich their learning experiences and better prepare them to live and work in an increasingly multicultural society. Beyond the need for representative minority teacher/leader role models is the concern that the absence of such individuals works to "distort social reality" or limit children's worldview, as well as their place in the world. It is important to consider that "many teachers simply do not have the frames of reference and points of view similar to their ethnically and culturally different students because they live in different existential worlds" (Gay, 1993, p. 287). Teachers of color "bring different kinds of understandings about the world than do those whose home lives are more similar to the worldview underlying Western schooling" (Delpit, 1993, p. 102), and they can provide diverse perspectives, as well as instruction that reflects culturally relevant pedagogical practices (Ladson-Billings, 1992).

Promoting Diversity

Over the recent years, numerous projects have attempted to address the concern over limited minority representation in education, including the role postsecondary institutions need to play in order to meet the challenges of promoting diversity and retention in preservice teacher training programs, and eventually in a professional teaching workforce. Yet, Jones and Clemson (1995) have pointed out that commonly recommended projects such as future teachers' groups, monetary incentives, grow-your-own programs, postbaccalaureate programs, alternative certification programs, advertising/public relations campaigns, mentor programs, and public-oriented dissemination projects have been less than successful.

On the other hand, college reading, learning,and writing programs successfully serve a full range of nontraditional students (Boylan, Bliss, & Bonham, 1997) during the first year in college. It is puzzling why developmental reading, learning, and writing programs have not coordinated instruction more closely with colleges of education so as to promote greater opportunity for nontraditional students--often of color--to gain entry to teacher education programs. This article describes the critical theory and practice behind a project that draws upon the power of a professional learning community (Tinto & Goodsell, 1993, Tinto, Goodsell-Love, & Russo, 1993, Tussman, 1969, Wilcox, K.J., delMas, R.C., Stewart, B., Johson, A.B., & Ghere, D., 1997) targeted at potential educators enrolling in an university through a special admissions programs.

Theoretical Framework

If educators are to grapple seriously with the reasons why the percentage of minority students in teacher education programs remains low, and thus how we can recruit and retain more people of color in the field, we need to question the very nature of the educational and societal structures that contribute to this dilemma. The features and implications of these demographics illuminate the acute necessity to examine critically the classroom instruction and professional preparation of future teachers. Teacher educators concerned with such imbalance would best focus on a discourse of student experience, and emancipatory pedagogical practices drawn from a critical theory of schooling as advocated by Giroux (1989, p.149). He notes that such an examination of pedagogical practice requires an analysis of social practices organizing systems of inequality and also assigning meaning to individuals through self- and social representations defining dominant categories for ordering social life. Furthermore, developing a theory of schooling as a form of cultural politics means analyzing how social power organizes the categories of class, race, gender, and ethnicity as a set of ideologies and practices that constitute specific configurations of power and politics. Hence, he would argue that teacher educators must develop a deconstructive practice that uncovers rather than suppresses the complex histories, interests, and experiences of the diverse voices that construct the lived experiences of future teachers.

A learning community with its integrated classes, flexible scheduling, and expanded curriculum is a most viable mechanism for undertaking such a critical examination.

Curriculum theory as a form of what Aronowitz and Giroux (1993) term cultural politics is inextricably linked to the language of critique and possibility. Critique involves engaging future educators in dialogue over the constructs of how the dominant school culture works to maintain the interests and values of the dominant culture while dismissing and marginalizing the forms of knowledge, language, and experience valued by subordinate groups.

Underlying the notion of a language of possibility and the discourse of experience is the commitment to hope and emancipation, as well as the goals of self- and social empowerment. Empowering education, according to Shor (1992), is an "active, cooperative, and social practice" for social change, and invites students to be "change agents and social critics" (p. 15-16). This social process of empowerment for self- and social change consists of students bringing together their understandings, language, and experiences while extending their perspectives. In a democratic community (such as a learning community), a dialogue of understanding evolves from recognizing, respecting, and valuing the alternative perspectives and realities of others. When students share openly their readings of the text and the world, they collide

with the readings or understandings of others and begin to see beyond their original perspectives or boundaries. Through this social learning process students extend their understandings by listening to each other and considering alternate perspectives (Pradl, 1996). In these environments, dialogic relationships grow in an an atmosphere of trust creating pedagogical practices that seek not to marginalize people, but to validate their stories and their histories.

A culturally relevant instruction, according to Ladson-Billings (1992), apprentices students into a learning community and develops the curriculum not from the canon of the dominant culture, but from the lived-experiences of the students. Teachers and student in this vision of culturally relevant pedagogy view themselves as political beings and engage in a collaborative struggle against the status quo. Through reading, writing, and discussion, this community of learners examines the "current socioeconomic and political conditions [that] are inequitable and unjust" and constructs "...the understanding that teachers must understand and participate in the world outside the classroom..." (p. 388) in order to triangulate social change.

The Collaborative Project

The possibilities generated by cooperative efforts on the part of college developmental reading and writing programs, special admissions programs, freshman experience projects, and

colleges of education in promoting diversity in the preservice training programs, and eventually in the teaching force, are vast and are indeed the impetus for this collaborative partnership. The recruitment and retention of students of color may be fostered to a greater degree through recruiting entering special admissions or developmental education students who are interested in the teaching profession, providing them with culturally relevant instruction and thematically linked developmental courses directly related to their teaching pursuits, and providing support systems that offer education cohort students academic guidance, as well as tutoring and mentoring.

Project Goals

The primary goals for the Professional Preparatory Program include, foremost, the collaborative efforts to increase the proportion of ethnically diverse majors in the fields of elementary, middle grades, secondary, early childhood, and special education. Inherently this program strives to increase the retention and graduation rate of minority students within teacher preparation programs.

Another primary goal is to provide preeducation majors entering the university through the special admissions program with the opportunity to be part of a learning community built upon thematically linked, integrated, multiterm preprofessional and developmental education experiences focused on the critique

and possibilities of schooling, specifically education in the 21st century. These reading, writing, and reflective dialogue experiences are based are on a theory of schooling rooted in a critical pedagogy, as well as empowering educational practices. Also, in respect to the roadblocks competency tests can produce, an additional goal of the program is designed to prepare cohort members through course work, workshops, and tutoring, if necessary, to pass the basic skills subtest of the Illinois State Certification Tests.

Project Rationale

This cooperative program design is embedded in the assumptions that retention in higher education and success in a major field is promoted by:

(1) involving students in a learning community that relates to and values their academic and career goals and interests, as well as their lived experiences. Each student involved in the Professional Preparatory Program has identified a desire to pursue a career in the teaching and has articulated an intention to matriculate into a preservice professional program in the field of education.

(2) providing quality developmental education services that promote transfer of learning strategies and skills to courses in both the general studies program and the professional sequence. For instance, the college reading and college study strategies courses are linked thematically to other core courses required of future teachers, and this linkage provides the

context for application and transfer of strategies and skills for authentic purposes.

(3) providing a credit bearing freshman experience seminar linked to developmental education course work, which directly supports entry into a major in education. The seminar is designed to provide students with information about requirements for entry into preprofessional programs and other university requirements impacting future teachers, as well as academic preparation for meeting requirements for entry into these programs.

(4) providing students with foundational knowledge supporting success in professional courses. The linked courses are designed around the theme "Education in the Year 2000", and students focus on examining and exploring critical issues and the implications of these issues to themselves and their communities while developing more sophisticated strategies for the demands of college reading, writing and studying, and

(5) giving students, as part of a learning community, the opportunities to develop relationships with other cohort members interested in similar pursuits, as well as with faculty and senior level students during the first year in higher education.

Design

Students are enrolled in three linked courses during their first semester on campus, a college reading course, a basic writin course, and a freshman experience course. During the second semester, they enroll in another set of linked courses, a

college reading and study strategies course, general writing course, and an introductory educational foundations course. Students self-select to enter the learning community at the time they come to the university for orientation. Instructors meet throughout the year to discuss student progress, cooridation issues, curricular revisions, etc.

Semester One

Students examine critical issues in education through their reading, dialogue, reflection, and writing activities. Students enrolled in the college developmental reading course engage in extensive and intensive reading and responding to four assigned books (Among Schoolchildren, 36 Children, Savage Inequalities, Life in Schools), a student choice book from among Dangerous Minds, Amazing Grace, You Can't Say--You Can't Play, or Always Running, and a student authored book all related to the learning community theme. The forms of discourse of the texts are presented so that text becomes more complex across the semester. Vocabulary development is through a student-driven generative model, and reading comprehension is enhanced through multiple experiences with texts, or forms of knowledge, that relate to and value the students' lived-experiences. Also, the reading and writing connection is strengthened through students' collaborative efforts to publish their own critical philosophical and pedagogical beliefs about schooling and education, as well as their own voices in journals, stories, or narratives. Themes are revisited throughout the semester in a

spiral design where each exposure and each opportunity for collaboration promotes more sophisticated responses and understandings by individual students and the learning community as a whole.

There is a particular emphasis on fostering 1.) a discourse community where students are empowered as learners through valuing diverse and alternative perspectives, 2.) a focus on exploring and challenging forms of schooling that seek to limit or marginalize members of oppressed groups, and 3.) a valuing of the experiences and voices the students bring to the classroom. Hence, the discourse of student experience supports a view of pedagogy and empowerment that allows students to draw upon their own experiences and cultural resources and that also enables them to play a self-consciously active role as producers of knowledge within the teaching and learning process. (Giroux, 1989, p. 149)

The focus of the content oriented freshman experience seminar is to allow students to meet weekly with a counselor from Educational Services and Programs, and at times, with an adviser from the College of Education in an effort to foster students' successful orientation and acclimation to the university environment. Specific objectives lead students to critically reflect upon and apply strategies for coping successfully with changing academic, social, and cultural demands placed upon them during the freshman year. The students

also develop a working knowledge of resources that promote persistence and retention. Students in the learning community are also provided with opportunities to engage in a panel discussion with practicing teachers and are introduced to the maze of institutional and also state general education and major requirements of the teacher education programs.

Both the first semester and second semester English writing courses are designed to incorporate readings and discussion related to the theme of education. A process writing model with an emphasis on personal narrative and experience serves as the focus of the first semester writing course. Students write extensively with opportunities for multiple revision, peer editing, and instructor guidance. Students are introduced to word processing activities which were not always available at the secondary schools from which they have been drawn.

Semester Two

Coordinated and thematically linked educational experiences continue through a reading and study strategies course that introduces the practical application, and transfer of study strategies and critical reading techniques in the context of a linked introductory educational foundations course. Coordination of both the curriculum and the instruction between the instructors of the two courses allows for greater opportunities for students to apply study strategies in real contexts (e.g., with the class text Affirming Diversity: The

Sociopolitical Context of Multicultural Education and articles held on library review), which in turn strengthens learning. Students explore from a multidimensional perspective, the various philosophical, sociological, and instructional components of schooling and education in the linked introductory educational foundations course, and they are able to choose from the plethora of study strategies that best suit their needs.

Students continue to meet individually with and receive counseling from their freshman seminar instructor/counselor, as well as to meet more formally with the assigned academic adviser to discuss plans and requirements for entry into the teacher education program. Future plans call for the development of a peer counseling component where senior level students are able to provide the new students with insider information known best by students who have successfully navigated the postsecondary system.

Students within the cadre continue as a group into a general writing course. The students progress from the personal narrative of the basic writing course to more formal discourse of the scholarly environment during the second semester. Drawing upon the thematic content, the students more deeply explore the critical issues related to pedagogy as they learn to prepare various types of research papers. Students use traditional forms of library based resources/references as well

as newer evolving resources available through the worldwide webb.

Discussion

For the instructors, the curricular and pedagogical reconstructing to promote a community of empowered learners in thematically linked courses results in increased collaboration, sharing of ideas, and planning of coordinated lesson activities and events among the instructors. The linked course framework for instruction fosters more creative curricular innovations that seek to build upon students' past experiences, and provides rich and meaningful contexts and links with which students construct new knowledge.

The coordinated, multiterm, thematically linked courses bring together students with relevant interests and unique experiences while fostering opportunities for these students to learn from each other; "the classroom space is seen as providing occasions for students to support one another as they test ideas and learn from each other" (Pradl, 1996, p. 88). The courses integrate thematic content, develop learning and transfer of study skills and techniques across content courses, emphasize the application and transfer of skill development to "real-life" situations, engage the students in meaningful learning, provide a firm educational base of knowledge related to issues that are critically linked to students' past experiences and prior

knowledge, and encourage students to bring their own stories or mini-narratives to the learning process.

Teacher education faculty and instructors provide support, advising, and mentoring relationships for the cohort group, while cohort student members provide each other with a supportive group of peers which creates a rich sense of community. The community of faculty, instructor, and cohort members appear to have a positive effect on the students' overall acclimation to social and academic university life, interest and motivation, as well as retention in the Preprofessional Preparation Program thus far. To date, there also appears to be a significant benefit to participating in the community, in terms of cumulative GPAs and second year retention rates as compared to the general special admissions population. The culturally relevant experiences and learning opportunities fostered through this collaborative partnership, create an empowering educational environment more conducive to the success and retention of people of color in a teacher preparation program, and eventually in the teaching workforce.

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